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Beware: Commuting Is Hazardous to Your Health — Cameron on Transportation

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It shouldn't come as much surprise to learn that commuting, especially by car, is hazardous to your health.

Research now shows the longer your drive, the greater the risk of obesity, heart attacks and even low birth-weight babies for moms-to-be. At fault are a number of factors.

Your Enemies

Stress

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Being stuck in bumper-to-bumper traffic increases your cortisol and adrenaline levels, [increasing your risk of a heart attack](#) during your drive and for an hour after. Getting angry when someone cuts you off only makes things worse. Increased blood pressure also leads to lack of sleep, leaving you tired even as you leave the house each morning.

Obesity

The longer your commute, by car or mass transit, the more sedentary your life and the less exercise you get. Couple that commute with fast food (and its sugar, salt and fat) and you're at even greater risk.

Back and neck pain

A 2010 Gallup poll shows a third of all people who commute more than 90 minutes a day complain of pain due to poor posture and uncomfortable seating.

Pollution

The longer you're stuck in traffic the more bad air you breathe. A 2007 study of Los Angeles residents showed that half of their exposure to harmful air happened during their drive time.

Low birth-weight

Researchers at [Lehigh University](#), studied New Jersey birth records. They found that for pregnant women commuting 50 miles each day, there was a 1 percent increase in the chance of having a low birth-weight baby for every 10 miles they traveled. Not only was "chronic maternal stress" a factor, but so were missed doctor visits due to lack of free time.

The [average commute time for Connecticut residents](#) is 26 minutes each way, and climbing. For Fairfield County residents going to jobs in New York City, it's more than an hour. And as traffic worsens and trains run slower, those commute times are getting longer.

For those who bike or walk to work, the risks are lessened, but not eliminated. The physical exertion is better for your heart, but bikers and pedestrians are still prone to collisions and accidents.

Just 20 years ago, up to 70 percent of kids walked to school. Now it's only about 20 percent as the others take the school bus or are driven by their parents. We're turning our kids into local commuters at a very young age.

You Can Fight This

What can you do if you must commute long distances? Plenty.

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Try not to get stressed out while driving. Leave a bit earlier than usual so you're not grinding your teeth fearing you'll be late. Listen to books on tape, podcasts or something fun — not the news, which will only contribute to anxiety. Try varying your route. A change of scenery will keep you engaged.

On mass transit, don't isolate yourself. Socialize by talking to your fellow commuters (but not in the Quiet Car!)

In your car, keep the windows up and the air recirculating to avoid auto exhausts. Make up for the sedentary (though stressful) drive by taking a walk at lunch.

Acknowledge the lack of control in your commute when traffic or train delays happen. Just know that you're doing the best you can with the things you can control — you're going to get there eventually, and most of all, you're trying to get there safely.

Jim Cameron has been a Darien resident for more than 25 years. He is the founder of the [Commuter Action Group](#), sits on the [Merritt Parkway Conservancy](#) board and also serves on the Darien RTM and as program director for Darien TV79. The opinions expressed in this column, republished with permission of Hearst CT Media, are only his own. You can reach him at CommuterActionGroup@gmail.com.

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